

In The Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom

Sakaguchi Ango

Translated by Jay Rubin

IN THE FOREST UNDER



CHERRIES IN FULL BLOOM

By Sakaguchi Ango
Translation by Jay Rubin

Nowadays, when the cherries bloom, people think it's time for a party. They go under the trees and eat and drink and mouth the old sayings about spring and pretty blossoms, but it's all one big lie. I mean, it wasn't until Edo, maybe a couple of hundred years ago, that people started crowding under cherry blossoms to drink and puke and fight. In the old days – the really old days – nobody gave a damn about the view. They were *scared* to go under the blossoms. People today think they can have a wild time under the trees, but take the people out of the picture and it's just plain scary. Look at the old Noh play, the one about the mother who goes crazy trying to find her little boy who was kidnapped. She thinks she can see his ghost there, in the shade of the blossoms that stretch off into the distance. She dies crazy, buried in petals (all right, I made that part up). Without people, a forest of cherries in full bloom is not pretty, just something to be afraid of.

When they crossed Sazuka Pass in the old days, travelers had to take the road that ran through a forest of cherry trees. They were all right when the trees were not in bloom, but under the blossoms they'd lose their minds. They'd race for green trees or dead trees, trying to get out from under the blossoms as fast as they could. When a traveler was alone, all he had to do was run out of there to find relief under ordinary trees, but it was harder for those traveling in pairs. No two people run at the same speed, so one would always fall behind. He'd scream for the other to wait, but the first one, crazed with fear, would leave his friend behind. Passing beneath the flowering forest of Sazuka Pass marked the end of many a friendship: the one who had fallen behind would never trust the other again. And so, to avoid passing beneath the blossoms, travelers quite naturally began to take a less direct route through the mountains, until the cherry forest was left in stillness.

Years went by, and then a robber – a cruel mountain bandit – took to living in the hills. He'd swoop down on the highway, strip the clothes from travelers, and sometimes, if he had to, take their lives. But even he went crazy with fear when he stepped into the blossoming cherry forest. He hated cherry blossoms after that. They scared him. Underneath the blossoms, the wind wouldn't blow, but he still seemed to hear it howling. No, there was no wind, no sound of anything, just himself and his

footsteps, wrapped in a cold, silent wind that never moved. He'd feel the life inside him scattering like so many soft, silent cherry blossoms, and he'd want to run out of there, screaming, with his eyes shut tight. Of course, if he actually shut his eyes he'd just crash into a tree, so he couldn't do that, which drove him even crazier.

He was an easygoing fellow, though, the kind that never regrets anything, so he just felt sort of strange that this would happen to him. Oh, well, I'll think about it next year, he told himself. He didn't feel like it this year. Next year, when the trees bloomed again, he'd really think about it. He had been telling himself the same thing every year now for over ten years: I'll think about it next year. And another year would pass.

As he went on making excuses for himself, the number of his wives grew from one to seven. The eighth he got from the highway as he had all the rest: by stripping her husband of his wife and his clothes. Then he killed the husband.

From the moment he killed the husband, the bandit felt there was something weird going on. This time wasn't like the others: something was strange, though he couldn't tell what. But he was not one to dwell on things.

He hadn't planned to kill the man at first. He thought he'd strip him like the others and send him off with a good kick, but the woman was too beautiful. He had to kill her man. This took him by

surprise – and he could see it had taken her by surprise as well. He turned around to find her on the ground. Her legs had buckled, and she was staring at him with out-of-focus eyes. ‘You’re my wife now,’ he said to her, and she nodded. He took her hand and tried to pull her up. ‘I can’t walk. Carry me on your back,’ she said. ‘Sure, sure,’ he said, and swung her up. He started walking, but when he came to a steep rise he told her to get down. She would have to walk – it was too dangerous here.

‘No, no,’ she said, and clung to his back. ‘If this trail is hard for a mountain man like you, how am I supposed to walk it? Just think about that.’

‘All right, never mind,’ he said with a chuckle, exhausted though he was. ‘But anyhow, get down for a minute. It’s not that I need a rest or anything – I’m too strong for that. But I don’t have eyes in the back of my head. I can’t see your pretty face. So get down for a minute and let me take a look.’

‘No! No!’ she cried, tightening her grip on his neck. ‘Not here! This place is too deserted, I hate it! Hurry and take me to your house as fast as you can. Otherwise, I won’t be your wife. I’ll bite off my tongue and die!’

‘Never mind, never mind,’ he said, ‘I’ll do whatever you want.’

Melting with happiness, the bandit dreamed of the life that he would share with this beautiful wife of his. He squared his shoulders and turned slowly to show the woman the mountains all around them:

front, back, right, left.

‘See these mountains? Every single one of them belongs to me,’ he said, but she paid him no heed. Disappointed, he said, ‘Do you hear what I’m telling you? Every mountain you see here, every tree, every valley, every cloud rising out of every valley – they all belong to me.’

‘Will you *please* hurry up?’ she said, ‘I don’t want to stay here a minute longer. Look at all the rocks on the cliff up there.’

‘Never mind, never mind,’ he said. ‘We’ll be getting to my house soon, and I’ll make you the best meal you’ve ever tasted.’

‘Can’t you go faster? I want you to run!’

‘It’s too steep. I can’t run here, even when I’m alone.’

‘So you’re a weakling, eh? I wouldn’t have guessed it to look at you. I can’t believe I’ve let myself become the wife of such a helpless man! Oh, no, what’s to become of me?’

‘What are you talking about? A little hill like this...’

‘Then hurry up, will you? Don’t tell me you’re tired already?’

‘Just watch. When I get past this stretch, I’ll run faster than a deer.’

‘But you’re breathing so hard. And I think your face is pale.’

‘Things are always like that at first. Just wait. When I really get going, I’ll run so fast it’ll make

your head spin.'

But in fact the bandit was so tired he felt he was coming apart at the joints. By the time he reached his house his eyes were swimming, his ears were ringing, and he didn't have the strength to groan. His seven wives came out to greet him, but he had all he could do to work the kinds out of his body and lower the woman to the ground.

The seven wives were stunned at the sight of the most beautiful woman they had ever seen, and she in turn was stunned at the sight of the seven wives' filthiness. Some had been beauties long before, but there was no way to tell that now. Sickened at the sight of them, the woman cringed behind the man.

'What are these mountain women?' she demanded.

'They used to be my wives,' he said, which wasn't bad for an answer made up on the spot. 'Used to be.' But the woman was relentless.

'So *these* are your wives?' she pressed him.

'Well, I mean, you know, that's because I never saw anyone as pretty as you before.'

'Kill that one!' she screamed, pointing at the woman with the best features.

'Oh, come on, I really don't have to kill her. Just think of her as your maid.'

'You killed my husband, didn't you? And now you tell me you can't kill your own wife? What makes you think I'd become the wife of a man like that?'

A moan slipped through the man's tight lips. He leaped at the wife in a single bound and cut her down where she stood. But he had no time to catch his breath.

'Now this one!' screamed the woman. 'Kill this one next!'

The man hung back for a moment, then he strode up to the next wife and sunk his sword into her throat. The head was still rolling on the ground when the woman's clear, lovely voice named her next victim.

'Now this one!' she cried.

The next wife hid her face in her hands and screamed aloud, but the sword shot up in the direction of the scream, then came flashing down. The remaining wives leaped to their feet and scattered in all directions.

'Get them all!' cried the woman. 'Look! There's one in the bushes! And there goes another one behind you!'

The man raised his bloody sword and raced through the woods in mad pursuit. One of the wives was sprawled on the ground, unable to flee. She was the ugliest of them all, and a cripple to boot. After the man had cut down the other wives, he came back to finish her off, but when he raised his sword again, the woman commanded him: 'Don't kill that one. She can be my maid.'

'I might as well kill her while I'm at it.'

'Don't be stupid! I'm telling you not to kill her.'

‘Oh, yeah, I guess you’re right.’

He threw his sword away and plopped down on the spot. Fatigue welled up within him. His eyes swam, and he felt heavy, as if rooted to the earth. Then he heard the silence and felt a sudden rush of fear. He turned in horror to find the woman standing behind him, looking lost. The man felt as if he had just wakened from a nightmare. The woman’s beauty swallowed him: his eyes, his soul ceased to move. But he felt uneasy. He did not know how or why this wave of uneasiness was coursing through his chest, but he could almost ignore it because her beauty had sucked the soul right out of him.

I know this feeling, he thought. Something like this has happened to me before. He thought again, and then it hit him.

In the forest, under cherries in full bloom. It’s like that. How was it like that? He didn’t know. But it *was* like that, he was sure. This was as much as he ever understood anything. He was the kind of man who didn’t mind if he only got the first part.

The long mountain winter had ended, and patches of snow remained on the peaks and in the shade of trees in the valleys, but the time of the blossoms was approaching, and signs of spring glittered all across the sky.

This year when the cherries bloom, I’ll do it, he thought. It wasn’t so bad when he first went under the blossoms. He would push on and walk

beneath them. But, a step at a time, his head would get crazier. Ahead, behind, to the right, to the left, he would see only cherry blossoms bearing down upon him until, as he neared the middle of the forest, a blind fear would overtake him. I'll do it this year, he told himself. I'll stand – no, I'll sit in the middle of the forest when the cherries are in full bloom. And then it came to him: I'll take her with me this time. He glanced at the woman, felt a flutter in his chest, and averted his gaze. The charred shred of an idea stayed within him: She mustn't find out what I am thinking.

She was impossible to please. He would prepare her meals with all the care he knew how to give, but still she would complain about the food. He ran through the hills, hunting birds and deer for her, hunting wild boar and bear for her. The crippled woman wandered all day through the forest, searching for tender buds and roots for her, but never once did she give any sign of satisfaction.

'You mean I'm supposed to eat this stuff every day?'

'Hey, we're giving you special treats,' said the man. 'Until you got here, we ate these things maybe once in ten days.'

'Well, you're a mountain man. This may be good enough for you, but it sticks in my throat. There's nothing up here in the mountains. All night long, the only thing I hear is owls hooting. The least you

can do is give me food as good as what I'm used to in the capital, don't you think? A man like you can't imagine what it's like to breathe the air of the capital. You can't know how terrible it is for me to be shut off from the air of the capital. You've taken it away from me, and in its place you give me only the cawing of crows and the hooting of owls. And you're not even ashamed of yourself! You don't see how cruel you are!'

The man did not know what to make of the woman's spiteful words. He had no idea what she meant by 'the air of the capital'. What could possibly be missing from this happy life in the mountains? He was at a loss to deal with the misery of the woman as she poured out her resentment. He knew of nothing that could guide him in such a task, and so his frustration mounted.

He had killed more travelers from the capital than he could remember. They all had money, and they all carried fancy things. They were easy marks, but sometimes he would open a bag and be disappointed with its contents. Then he would curse his victim: 'So you're from the capital, huh? Farmers have better stuff than this!' For him, the capital was just a place with people who carried fancy things – things he could rob from them. It never crossed his mind to think about where this 'capital' might be.

The woman took great care of her combs, her ornamental hairpins, her rouge. And she would

scream at him if he so much as touched her kimono with his hands caked in mud or dripping with the blood of animals. Her kimonos were her life, it seemed, and protecting them her mission. The space around her had to be spotless, and the house kept in order. Nor could she be satisfied, like the others, with a simple rob and narrow sash. She wanted lots of kimonos and many sashes – sashes she could tie in strangely shaped knots, with the ends dangling down for no good reason. She would add one pretty thing after another until they all came together as one perfect outfit. The man would stare at her, wide-eyed, and then let out a sigh. Now he saw it: this was how a thing of beauty took shape. And that beauty made him full. Of that there could be no doubt. Meaningless bits and pieces came together to form a whole, but if you took the thing apart again, it would just go back to being meaningless bits and pieces. In his own way, he understood this as a kind of wonderful magic.

The woman ordered him to bring wood from the hills and set him to making things. He himself had no idea what he was making or what it was good for. One of the things she called a 'koshō', which turned out to be a kind of chair. On nice days she would have him take it outside for her and sit in the sun or under a tree with her eyes closed. The other thing she had him make was an armrest. Reclining on the floor indoors, she would lean against it and lose herself in thought. All of this seemed so exotic

to him, so enchanting and seductive. It was real magic, and though he himself was helping to make it work, it still brought forth cries of surprise and admiration.

Every morning, the crippled woman would comb the woman's long black hair. The water she used was hauled by the man from a far-off spring that fed the river in the valley. He himself was moved to see the special effort that he was willing to expend for her. What he wanted most of all was to be part of the magic – to be allowed to touch that hair as the comb passed through it. 'No! Not with those hands!' the woman snapped, sweeping him away. The man drew his hands back like a child, ashamed, and watched what was left of his shattered dream. The hair reached its full glossiness, the crippled woman tied it back to expose the face beneath, and a thing of beauty came into being.

'I never thought these could be so...' the man murmured as he toyed with the elaborate hairpins that lay nearby. Such things had never seemed to have any meaning or value to him before, and even now he had no idea what to say about decoration – the harmony and connection between things. Magic, though, was something that he did understand. Magic was what gave things life. Everything had its own life.

'Stop playing with those!' the woman cried. 'Why do you have to do that every morning?'

'It's so strange...'

‘What is so strange?’

‘Oh, I don’t know...’ the man mumbled, at a loss.

He had found something truly amazing, but he did not know what it was.

And so the man conceived a fear for the capital. This fear was not an actual terror, but more like the embarrassment and nervousness felt by a know-it-all toward something he doesn’t understand. Every time the woman spoke of ‘the capital’, his heart felt a shudder, but because he had never known a sense of fear toward anything he could see in this world, he was not familiar with that feeling, nor was he accustomed to shame. Toward the capital he felt only the hatred he might hold for an enemy.

He had swooped down on thousands of travelers from the capital, but not one had been able to fight him off, he thought with satisfaction. Nothing in the past gave him any reason to fear being betrayed or wounded, a thought that always made him feel pleased and proud. He measured his own strength against the woman’s beauty. A wild boar was the one thing strong enough to give him a little trouble, but even the boar was not an enemy to fear. He did not have to be afraid of anything.

‘Are there people in the capital with fangs?’

‘There are samurai with bows and arrows.’

He laughed. ‘With my bow, I could bring down a little sparrow all the way across the valley. I’m sure there’s no one in the capital with skin so hard it would break my sword.’

‘There are samurai with armor.’
‘Would a sword break against armor?’
‘It would.’
‘I can wrestle down a bear or a boar.’
‘If you’re really so strong, take me to the capital. Use your strength to surround me with anything I want. Dress me in the best the capital has to offer. If you can make me feel that kind of deep-down pleasure, then you really are a strong man.’

‘That’s easy.’

The man set his heard on going to the capital. Before three days and nights had passed, he would surround the woman with piles of combs and ornamental hairpins and kimonos and mirrors and rouge. Of this he had no doubt. The one thing that did concern him, though, was something that had nothing to do with the capital.

And that was the cherry forest.

In another two or three days, the cherry forest would be in full bloom. This was the year, he had decided. He would prove that he could sit still in the middle of the cherry forest at the height of the blossoms. Each day he would slip off to the forest to check on the progress of the buds. ‘In three days,’ he told the woman when she pressed him to take her to the capital.

‘Don’t tell me you have preparations to make,’ she said with a frown. ‘Don’t tease me. The capital is calling out to me.’

‘But still, I have a promise to keep.’

‘You have to keep a promise? *Here*? Who is here, in these mountains, for you to make a promise to?’

‘Nobody is here. But still, I have a promise I must keep.’

‘How very unusual! There’s no one here, but still you have a promise to keep. To whom?’

The man could not lie to her.

‘The cherries are going to bloom.’

‘So you made a promise to see the cherry blossoms?’

‘I have to see the cherry blossoms before I leave.’

‘And why is that?’

‘Because I have to see about going under the blossoms.’

‘That’s what I am asking you about. *Why* do you have to see about going under the blossoms?’

‘Because the cherries are going to bloom.’

‘*Why* because the cherries are going to bloom?’

‘Because a cold wind fills the place under the blossoms.’

‘The place under the blossoms?’

‘The place without an end. Under the blossoms.’

‘The place without an end under the blossoms?’

The man got confused and upset.

‘Take me with you under the blossoms.’

‘I can’t do that,’ the man insisted. ‘I have to be alone.’

The woman gave him a bitter smile.

The man had never seen a bitter smile before, a smile so malicious. He did not think of it as 'malicious', though. He thought of it as something he could never cut through with his sword. He knew this because the woman's smile engraved itself on his brain. Each time he thought of it, it stabbed his mind like a sword blade, and there was no way he could stab it back.

The third day came.

He left without telling the woman. The cherry forest was in full bloom. With his first step into the forest, he thought of the woman's bitter smile. It sliced into his brain with a whole new sharpness. Now he was confused. The cold beneath the blossoms pressed in upon him from the four endless directions. The wind tore through him, turning his flesh transparent, roaring in from all four directions at once, filling the entire space beneath the blossoms. His voice began to how, and he ran. What utter emptiness! He cried, he prayed, he writhed in agony, he wanted only to get away from this place. The moment he knew he had escaped from beneath the blossoms, he felt as if he were waking from a dream. The only difference was the pain he felt within each labored breath.

The man, the woman, and the crippled maid began to live in the capital.

Each night the man would creep into a mansion under orders from the woman, taking clothes and

jewels and trinkets, but these were not enough to satisfy her. What she wanted most of all were the heads of the people who lived in the mansion.

In their own house were heads from dozens of mansions. The heads were lined up in their own special place, surrounded by screens on all four sides. Some heads hung on cords. There were too many of them now for the man to keep track of, but the woman knew them all, even those whose hair had fallen out and whose flesh had rotted, leaving only a skull. She would fly into a rage if the man of her maid dared to move them. The such-and-such family belonged *here*, the so-and-so family belonged *there*.

The woman played with the heads every day. One head would go out for a stroll with his retinue of retainers. One head family would go to visit another head family. Some heads would fall in love. A woman head would spurn a man head, or a man head would forsake a woman head and make her cry.

Once a young princess was deceived by a councilor of state. On a dark, moonless night, the councilor head crept into the home of the princess head disguised as her lover. Only after he had managed to sleep with her did the princess head realize what had happened. She could not bring herself to hate the councilor head, though. Instead, shedding tears for her own sad fate, she became a nun. Then the councilor head went to the convent

and raped the nun head. She wanted to die, but the councilor persuaded her to run away with him to the village of Yamashina, where the councilor head kept her in hiding for himself and she let her hair grow again.

Both the princess head and the councilor head had long since lost their hair. Their flesh was rotten and crawling with maggots, the bone showing through in places. The two heads would drink though the night and indulge in love play, biting each other, teeth clattering against bone, gobs of rotten flesh squashing and sticking, noses collapsing, eyeballs dropping out.

The woman loved it when the faces would stick together and then fall apart. The sight would send her into peals of uncontrollable laughter.

'Eat that cheek, now. Yum yum! Now let's eat her throat. Oh, what a delicious eyeball! Chew chew chew chew. Suck suck suck suck suck. Mmmmm, yummy yummy yummy. Oh! Marvelous! Now take a goood bite!'

The woman's laughter rang out, clear and lovely, as fresh and clean as the ringing of the most delicate porcelain.

One of her heads was that of a shaven-headed priest. On this head she lavished special hatred. She always gave it terrible roles to play. The priest head had to be hated by the others, to be tortured to death or executed by an official. Its hair actually grew out at first, but eventually, like the others, it

lost its hair, the flesh rotted off, and before long the head had been reduced to bone. Once that happened, the woman ordered the man to bring her another one. The new priest head he brought retained a trace of boyish beauty. Thrilled, the woman set it on her table, fed it sake, pressed her cheek to its cheek, and licked and tickled it all over. She quickly tired of this.

‘I want a big fat one,’ she said. ‘Make it really disgusting.’

To get the task over with quickly, the man brought back five priest heads at once. There was the head of a doddering old priest, another with thick eyebrows, heavy jowls, and a nose like a toad stuck to its face, one with a horse’s face and pointed ears, and one that oozed piety. But the one that the woman liked most of all was a huge priest in his fifties, a truly ugly man with eyes that drooped at the corners, flabby cheeks, and thick, heavy lips that sagged open. She would press her fingertips against the corners of his drooping eyelids and move with skin up in circles, shove sticks up the nostrils of his snub nose, turn the head upside-down and roll it around, clasp it to her breast and force a nipple between its thick lips, laughing all the while she ‘suckled’ it. But of this head she quickly tired as well.

The there was the head of a lovely young girl – a pure, gentle, aristocratic head, still childish but with a strangely grown-up sadness in death. Behind her

closed eyelids there seemed to lie hidden a jumble of pleasures, sorrows, and knowledge beyond her years. The woman treated this head with all the tenderness she might lavish on a daughter or a niece, endlessly combing out the long black tresses and applying make-up with the utmost care, until a soft, sweet face emerged, bathed in floral fragrances.

For the young girl head, the woman needed the head of a young nobleman. This she also made up with great care. Then the two became lost in mad, passionate, burning love play full of resentful posturing, anger, hatred, lying, deception, and sorrow. But when their passion flared up, the fire from one caught the other and the two became a roaring inferno. Soon, though, some of the filthiest heads – an evil samurai, a lustful older man, and a dissolute priest – came between them. The young nobleman was kicked and beaten and finally killed. Then, from all sides, the filthy heads went after the young girl head, which soon was smeared in patches of the others' rotting flesh. Their fang-like teeth bit into her, tearing off her nose, ripping out her hair. Once this happened, the woman punched holes in the girl head with a needle, cut it with a knife, and gouged out chunks of flesh until it was more filthy and disgusting than all the rest. Then she flung it away.

The man hated the capital. Once it had lost its

strangeness for him, all that remained was a feeling that he could never be at home there. He wore the same flowing robes as everyone else in the capital, but his were short, exposing his hairy shanks. He couldn't carry a sword in daylight hours. He had to go out shopping for what he needed. He actually had to pay for drinks at the sake sellers where the whores gathered. The city merchants ridiculed him. The women who came in from the country to sell their piles of vegetables made fun of him, and so did the children. Even the whores laughed at him.

In the capital the nobles rode in ox-carts down the middle of the avenues surrounded by barefoot retainers swaggering in robes and red-faced with the master's sake. The man would be cursed wherever he went – in the market, on the road, in the temple gardens of the city. 'Idiot,' they would call him. 'Dim-wit.' 'Moron.' But none of this bothered him anymore.

The man suffered from boredom more than anything else. People were boring: there was no way around it. They annoyed him in every way. They were just little dogs yapping at the heels of the big dogs walking down the street. He could not be bothered to feel anything about them, not resentment or envy or anger. Nothing in the mountains had annoyed him in this way, not the animals, the birds, the trees, the rivers.

'It's so boring here in the capital,' he said to the crippled woman. 'Don't you want to go back to the

mountains?’

‘The capital’s not boring to *me*,’ she said. The crippled woman spent each day cooking and doing laundry and gabbing with the neighbors. ‘I’ve got people to talk to here. I’m not bored. The mountains are where it’s boring. I don’t ever want to go back there.’

‘You don’t think it’s boring talking to people?’

‘Of course not. You can’t get bored if you’re talking all the time.’

‘That’s funny. The more I talk to people, the more bored I get.’

‘You’re bored because you *don’t* talk to people.’

‘You’re crazy. I get bored talking to people, so I don’t talk.’

‘You ought to give it a try. Talk to people. You won’t be bored anymore.’

‘Talk about what?’

‘Anything you want.’

‘I don’t want to talk about anything.’

Now he was getting annoyed. He gave a big yawn.

The capital had mountains, too. But every mountain had some kind of temple or hermitage on top, and instead of being quiet they were full of people. From up on the mountain, you could see the whole capital. What a lot of houses! he thought. And what a filthy view!

During the day he practically forgot that he spent his nights killing. Now even that was boring.

You swung your sword and a head fell off: that was all. And the heads were soft, squishy things. You couldn't feel the bone. It was like slicing through a radish. Though it always surprised him how heavy they were.

He felt he was beginning to understand the woman. A monk was ringing a temple bell like crazy. It was so damned stupid. You never knew what people were going to do next. If he had to live with them all the time, he'd probably want to do what the woman did and live with them as heads.

But the woman's desire was endless, and so now he was bored with that, too. Her desire was like a bird flying straight across the sky with no end in sight: flying on and on without a rest, never tiring, slicing cleanly through the wind.

The man himself was but an ordinary bird – perhaps an owl that hopped from branch to branch, stopping to doze now and then, maybe crossing a valley if it had to. Physically, he was quick and athletic. He moved well, he walked well, with great vitality. But his heard was a lumbering bird. Flying in an infinite straight line was out of the question for him.

From the mountain-top he watched the sky of the capital. A single bird was flying in a straight line across the sky, this sky that changed from day to night, from night to day, in an endless cycle of light and darkness. At the edges of the sky was nothing, just the infinite repetition of light and darkness,

but infinitude was something the man found impossible to comprehend. When he thought about the next day and the next day and the next, and the infinite repetition of light and darkness, it felt as if his head would split in two – not from the effect but the pain of thinking.

At home, he found the woman immersed in playing with her heads. As soon as she saw him come in, she gave the command she had prepared for him: ‘Bring me a dancer’s head tonight. The head of a beautiful dancer. I want to have her dance for me. I myself will sing the accompaniment.’

The man tried to recall the infinite repetition of light and darkness that he had witnessed from the mountain-top. He then might have seen this room as that sky, with its infinite, endless repetition of light and darkness, but he could no longer bring the sky to mind. And the woman was not a bird. She was just the beautiful woman who was always here. But he answered her: ‘I won’t do it.’

This came to her as a shock, but once it had sunk in, she laughed.

‘So now you’ve lost your nerve! You’re a weakling, like all the others.’

‘I am not a weakling.’

‘Then what are you?’

‘I’m just sick of it. There’s no end to it.’

‘So what? There’s no end to anything. You eat your meals every day. There’s no end to that, is there? You sleep every day. There’s no end to that,

is there?’

‘But this is different.’

‘Different? How different?’

The man did not know how to answer her, but he knew it was different. To escape the pain of having her out-talk him, he went outside.

‘Bring me the head of a dancer,’ the woman’s voice came after him, but he made no reply.

He tried to think of how it was different, but he could find no answer. Little by little, the day turned into night. He climbed the mountain once again, but the sky could no longer be seen.

When his head cleared, he found himself thinking that the sky would fall. The sky would fall. He felt terrible pain, as if someone were choking him. That was it: he would kill the woman.

By killing her, he could stop the endless repetition of light and darkness. And the sky would fall. Then he could breathe easy. But there would be a hole in his heart. The image of the bird would have flown from his breast and disappeared.

Is she me? he wondered. Was I the bird that flew straight across the sky without end? If I kill her, will I be killing myself? What am I thinking?

Why did he have to bring the sky down? He no longer understood the answer to that, either. All thoughts were hard to grasp. And after thoughts went away, the only thing left behind was pain. Dawn broke. He had lost the courage to go back to the house where the woman was. Instead, he

wandered through the mountains for several days.

One morning he woke up to find that he had been sleeping beneath cherry blossoms. The tree stood alone. It was in full bloom. He leaped up with a start – but not to flee. It was only one cherry tree, after all. No, he had leaped up with the thought of the cherry forest on Suzuka Mountain. It must also be in full bloom. He sank into a deep, nostalgic reverie.

Back to the mountains. He would go back to the mountains. How could he have forgotten such a simple thing? How could he have thought so long and hard about bringing the sky down? His nightmare had ended. He was saved. He had lost the feeling of early spring in the mountains but now its fragrance pressed in upon him, and he had it again, strong and cold.

The man went back to his house in the capital.

The woman seemed overjoyed to see him.

'Where *were* you?' she pleaded. 'I'm sorry I tormented you with such impossible demands. But please try to realize how lonely I've been without you!'

The woman had never spoken to him so tenderly before. Her words stabbed him in the chest, and his resolve was on the verge of melting away. But he had made up his mind.

'I'm going back to the mountains.'

'Without *me*?' she said. 'How could such a cruel thought have taken root inside you?'

Her eyes burned with anger. Her face showed the sharp pain of betrayal.

‘When did you turn into such a hard-hearted man?’

‘That’s what I mean. I hate it here in the capital.’

‘Even with *me* here?’

‘I just don’t want to live here anymore.’

‘But *I’m* here, aren’t *I*? Don’t you love me any more? While you were gone, all I could think of was *you*.’

For the first time since he had known her, the woman’s eyes filled with tears. The anger had vanished from her face, leaving only her pain at his coldness.

‘I thought you could only live in the capital,’ he said. ‘And I can only live in the mountains.’

‘I can only go on living if I have you. Don’t you know how I feel?’

‘But I can only live in the mountains.’

‘I’ll go with you, then, if you’re going back to the mountains. I can’t live a day without you.’ She pressed her face to his chest, and he could feel the heat of the tears pouring from her eyes. It was true, then – she couldn’t live without him anymore. New heads were her life, and he was the only one who could supply her with them. He was a part of her. She could not let him go. But she was also sure she could lure him back to the capital once he had satisfied his longing for the hills.

‘Can you live in the mountains?’ he asked.

'I can live anywhere if I have you.'

'You can't get the kind of heads you want in the mountains.'

'If I have to choose between you and the heads, I'll forget about the heads.'

The man wondered if he was dreaming. He was too happy. He couldn't believe it. Not even in a dream would he have been able to imagine something like this.

His breast was filled with new hope. Its arrival had been sudden and violent, and the painful thoughts that had been with him only moments before were now somewhere far away, out of reach. He forgot about his yesterdays with the woman, when she had never been so tender. He saw only now and tomorrow.

The two prepared to leave immediately. The crippled maid would remain in the capital. 'Wait here,' the woman whispered to her as they were leaving. 'We'll be back soon enough.'

Now his old mountains opened up before him. They looked as if they would answer if he called out to them. He took the old road. No one ever went that way anymore, and without people to tramp it down, all visible sign of the road had disappeared, leaving only woods and hills. The route would take them through the cherry forest.

'Carry me on your back,' said the woman. 'I can't climb these hills without a road.'

'I don't mind,' said the man.

He swung her up to his back without effort.

He thought about the day he first took the woman. That day, too, he had carried her on his back and climbed up the other side where the road crossed the pass. That day, too, he had been full of happiness, a feeling that today was all the richer.

The woman said, 'The day I met you, I asked you to carry me.'

'I was just thinking the same thing,' said the woman with joy in his voice. 'Look,' he said. 'All those mountains are mine. They valleys, the trees, the birds, even the clouds – these mountains are mine. They're so good, I feel like running, don't you? This never happened in the capital.'

'The first day, I made you run with me on your back, remember?'

'Sure I do. I got so tired, I almost fainted.'

The man was not forgetting about the cherry forest in full bloom. But on such a happy day as this, what different could it make that they would pass beneath it? He was not afraid.

And then the cherry forest appeared before his eyes, a mass of blossoms at their height. Here and there a petal fluttered down in the breeze. A layer of petals covered the earth beneath his feet. But where could they have come from? For, spread out above him, as far as he could see, were clouds of fully opened blossoms, from which it was impossible to imagine that a single petal had been lost.

The man stepped beneath the blossoms. It was utterly still in there, and seemed to be growing colder. Then he noticed that the woman's hands were freezing cold. Now he was afraid, and with the fear came certainty: she was a demon. Suddenly a cold wind began to blow from all four sides of the space beneath the blossoms.

The man saw that clinging to his back was a huge-faced old woman with purple skin. Her mouth gaped open from ear to ear, and her hair was a frizzled mass of green. The man began to run. He tried to knock the demon from his back, but the strength of her grip increased. Her hands dug into his neck; his eyes were growing dim. He was wild now. He pulled the demon's hands apart with all the strength he had, and as his neck slipped out of her grasp, he felt her slide down his back and tumble to the ground. Now it was his turn to attack. He locked his hands on the demon's throat until he realized that he was using all his strength to strangle a young woman, and that she was no longer breathing.

His eyes had clouded over. He tried to open them wider, but that didn't seem to bring his vision back. For all that lay before him, dead, was the woman, the same woman, whom he had strangled with his own hands.

His breathing stopped. At an end, too, were his strength and his thinking. On the woman's body, a few cherry petals had already fallen. He shook her.

He cried out to her. He clutched her to him. But all in vain. He threw himself down in tears. Not once in all the years since he had come to live in the mountains had he cried until this day. By the time he was himself again white cherry petals had begun to pile up on his back.

He was in the very center of the cherry forest. The four edges of the forest were hidden from him by blossoms. Yet his fear had vanished. Gone, too, was the wind that always blew from the edges of the forest in full bloom. Now there was only the hush of blossoms, falling, falling. Here he sat, for the first time, beneath the cherry forest in full bloom. He could go on sitting here forever. Because now he had no place to call home.

Even now, no one knows the secret of the cherry forest in full bloom. Perhaps it was loneliness. For the man no longer had to fear loneliness. He was loneliness itself.

Now, for the first time, he looked all around. Above him where the blossoms. Beneath them was the silent, infinite emptiness, the stillness of the rain of blossoms. That was all. Beyond that, there was no secret.

Some time went by before he felt something inside himself, faintly warm. And this, he found, was his sadness. Little by little, he began to sense the swelling warmth, wrapped as it was in the coldness of the blossoms and emptiness.

He reached out the pluck the petals from the

woman's cheek. But just as his hand reached her face, something strange happened. Beneath his hand lay only drifted petals. The woman had vanished, leaving petals in her place. And as he reached out to part the mound of petals, his hand, his arm, his body vanished. The space filled with petals and with frigid emptiness, nothing more.